

CTE'S ROLE IN WORKER RETRAINING

BY ALISHA HYSLOP

Unemployment in the United States has skyrocketed as a result of the recession, the loss of jobs to globalization, and increased use of technology to produce goods that were previously produced by individuals. The recent numbers are dismal, and individuals who lose their jobs are having a much harder time finding new work than in the past. In addition, there are many workers who are forced to work only part time or who are employed in positions paying low wages with no opportunity for advancement, resulting in lost hours of work, decreases in wages and reduced weekly earnings.

With record high unemployment rates, it may seem logical to assume that there are no jobs available. On the contrary, there are still many employment opportunities in the job market for workers with the right skills. The current unemployment trend stems from a widespread mismatch between displaced workers' skills and the current needs of employers. While some industries are downsizing, many

others are actually expanding. In fact, the number of job openings nationally increased by 25 percent between July 2009 and September 2010.¹ These employment opportunities, however, usually require knowledge and skills that unemployed workers have not developed because they were not needed in their previous positions. There is also a mismatch between the skills of many individuals in low-wage jobs and the skills required for these new employment opportunities, making it difficult for underemployed workers to advance.

The unemployed and those looking to advance from low-wage positions—even those who previously completed some form of postsecondary training—need the opportunity to gain skills and credentials that may be necessary to make them marketable to employers who currently have jobs available. In addition, regardless of the state of the economy in the future, jobs will continue to change and workers must respond to these changes by acquiring new skills to replace the outdated ones.

Career and Technical Education Provides Solutions

The economic downturn and growing skills mismatch dramatically highlight the importance of programs that retrain workers for the demands of the current workplace. New, targeted training programs have been developed throughout the nation, and have become increasingly popular with those in need of updated skills. The career and technical education (CTE) system has played a large role in the development of these programs, and CTE educators are leading efforts to ensure that new and newly redesigned programs are relevant and accessible to those most in need of additional education and training.

CTE programs offer a wide variety of workers the opportunity to update their current skills, develop new skills and knowledge, and obtain the necessary certificate or degree for desired employment. Institutions target the adult learner through short-term and accelerated programs that decrease the time required



for completion; utilize flexible learning approaches to account for students' other responsibilities; concentrate education and training on high-demand career areas to ensure students are prepared for jobs that exist in local economies; and include wrap-around support services to increase student success.

Offering Short-Term and Accelerated Programs

One of the biggest advances in CTE worker retraining programs has been the development of short-term and accelerated programs designed to get individuals back in the workforce quickly. These programs provide an opportunity for individuals to upgrade and develop skills in a rigorous educational environment at a faster pace. Such options are appealing to individuals without the time or money needed for full-time, traditional postsecondary programs, which often take up

to two years to complete. Many of these short-term opportunities result in certificates, diplomas or associate degrees—which increase the marketability of those workers who have earned them. Workers also have the option of taking non-credit continuing education classes that do not result in a certificate or degree, but do update the employees' skills and knowledge within a certain field; this helps to ensure job security and opportunities for advancement.

Utilizing Flexible Learning Approaches

Underemployed workers or workers looking to update or learn new skills often struggle to fulfill the time requirements of school due to other responsibilities and commitments. In addition to packaging programs in an accelerated format, many other flexible programs have been developed, including evening or online courses

and other alternative schedules. For example, at Madisonville Community College in Kentucky,² students' individual needs are assessed and then customized training is offered to fit both the needs and the schedule of the student. Training sessions are offered in the evening and on weekends, and basic self-paced learning programs are accessible online.

Offering Specific Support Services

Unemployed and underemployed workers often need additional support to complete training programs. To address this issue, CTE leaders have incorporated wrap-around support services into their programs, often targeted to meet the specific needs of particular subgroups of these populations. For example, these services and programs might provide additional support to those who speak English as a second language, displaced homemakers, aging dislocated workers or

Adapting to a Changing Labor Market

In Wisconsin, Gateway Technical College helps employers, employees and the community adapt to the changing labor market. The ultimate goal of the college is to "collaborate to ensure economic growth and viability by providing education, training, leadership and technological resources to meet the changing needs of students, employers and communities."⁴

Through partnerships with local technology centers, businesses and workforce development stakeholders, Gateway has developed strong links between the programs offered and the economic needs of the local community. This collaboration allows Gateway to develop customized training programs to provide unemployed and underemployed workers the skills necessary to obtain relevant, full-time employment in the local workforce.

Students looking for accelerated training opportunities can enroll in one of the many boot camps offered by the college to quickly develop the skills necessary for current job openings. Boot camps are offered through the college in the areas of computer numerical control (CNC), machine repair and welding. The programs are ideal for displaced or underemployed workers, and require no prior experience in the industry; although students must complete a basic skill assessment prior to enrollment.

The CNC Boot Camp runs for 14 weeks and the Machine Repair Boot Camp runs 19 weeks. Both are five days a week for eight hours per day. The Welding Boot Camp requires 14 weeks of class, with 20 hours invested per week. Upon satisfactory completion of a boot camp, certifications are awarded and students earn college credit toward a degree. The local

workforce development center is also working with local employers to find jobs for the program's graduates.

Underemployed workers can also participate in short-term, non-credit professional development opportunities to update skills and acquire necessary certifications. Professional development workshops are open to anyone interested, and are designed to improve capabilities through job-related training and professional growth opportunities. The workshops range from a single, six-hour program to 10-week programs, dependent on needs. Continuing education opportunities are available for workers in high-demand areas via workshops that cover a variety of topics, including computer software, leadership and specific technical skills. For example, torque training certification is offered to meet the needs of the growing global wind industry. **I**

underemployed full-time workers. These training programs are tailored to the specific background and individual needs of the learners. For example, the ESL Vocational Career Pathway offered at Portland Community College³ provides non-English speaking students with the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge for a specific profession, while they also learn to master the English language. English language learners who are unemployed or are underemployed can take advantage of programs such as ESL Health Care, ESL Food Service Program and ESL Office Skills.

Focusing on Local High-Demand Career Areas

In order to ensure that displaced workers and others in need of retraining can actually use the skills they gain through education programs, CTE programs have focused efforts on high-demand careers in their local areas. By identifying the high-need areas within a state or region, CTE programs can better meet the needs of those individuals enrolling in training programs, and, at the same time, specifically address local economic issues. High-demand careers have been identified at both the local and national levels, and CTE programs at community and technical colleges and technical centers have been developed to fulfill the need for training in these areas.

The trainings focus on both lifelong learning opportunities to keep workers' skills relevant, and retraining to develop the skills and knowledge of unemployed or underemployed workers. Support for CTE programs in high-demand areas is widespread, with local, state and federal resources being targeted toward this approach.

Looking Ahead

The U.S. economy depends on an appropriately skilled workforce. As jobs are phased out and new positions develop, members of the workforce must update

ACTE Releases New Issue Brief on Worker Retraining

The Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) has released a new Issue Brief, "Career and Technical Education's (CTE) Role in Worker Retraining." It was released in December 2010 to emphasize the importance of CTE in rebuilding the U.S. economy. ACTE's Issue Briefs are designed to highlight the role of CTE in a broader issue of national interest. Each brief is designed to strengthen the voice of CTE related to the specific issue and to draw more attention to CTE activities and best practices around the country. The briefs provide background information, highlight research, profile CTE programs and include numerous examples of how CTE is tied to the broader issue. Issue Briefs are designed in a concise, easy-to-read format that is ideal for use in advocacy and public awareness efforts with a variety of audiences. To download your copy of "Career and Technical Education's (CTE) Role in Worker Retraining," visit www.acteonline.org/issuebriefs.aspx. **I**



their skills to remain relevant. CTE programs have a clear role in providing support and retraining to unemployed and underemployed workers. Successful programs provide opportunities to decrease the unemployment rate and ultimately improve economic conditions by ensuring a skilled, relevant and adaptable workforce to support current and future industries.

Through programs that take into consideration the needs of both employers and students, unemployed and underemployed workers can update and advance their skills in high-demand areas. They can do so via short-term and accelerated programs; flexible learning approaches that account for students' other responsibilities; and wrap-around services offered through CTE programs that help ensure students' complete education and training programs. These comprehensive strate-

gies foster a well-trained workforce—one that is well poised to take advantage of the employment opportunities available today, and in the future. **I**

Endnotes

- 1 www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.nr0.htm
- 2 www.madisonville.kctcs.edu/Workforce_Solutions/Training_and_Development.aspx
- 3 www.league.org/leagueetlc/express/inn0308.htm
- 4 www.gtc.edu/page.asp?q=54

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